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Edward Glaeser on Triumph of the City

by nickland @ Monday, 20 June 2011 17:03

that's Shanghai interviews the world's most topical urbanist

Shanghai isn't one of the featured cities in your book. It's massive and massively high-rise. Did you ever consider writing about it?

Shanghai is one of the world's great cities, but I don't know the city well enough to write about it. I hope to get to know the city better and feature Shanghai's successes in some later work.

China is a place where cities have grown incredibly quickly and there's been a massive exodus from the countryside to urban life. What do you think China's cities should focus on as they grow?

Cities, today, succeed as forges of human capital and engines of innovation. China clearly recognizes this and is investing massively in education. That should continue. Just as importantly, China needs to focus on fostering more entrepreneurship by eliminating any remaining barriers to small start-ups.

You talk about how cities should be seen as "masses of connected humanity," rather than agglomerations of buildings. Do you think this is well understood at this point, or are too many places still attempting to "build their way back to success"?

Unfortunately, too often political leaders try to garner headlines with a splashy new structure. The key is to focus on those infrastructure investments that will really benefit the people in the city.

Are you optimistic about city planners around the world finding the balance between Paris and Mumbai, i.e. between Haussman-style central planning that risks sterility and a chaotic free-for-all?

That's the 10 trillion dollar question. I wish I could be more optimistic, but city planning is hard and many governments are either unable to manage chaos or too inclined to central

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control. This requires not just knowledge but political strength and that's a rare combination.

Which cities around the world are getting it right? Which aren't?

I believe that Singapore is the best-managed city in the world - good schools, a superb transportati
approach to regulation. But Hong Kong is also quite impressive, and I personally prefer it's somewh

The west has many urban powerhouses, but few of them are really models of perfect management.
Mayor Menino in Boston, but despite more than 15 years of hard work, Boston's schools are still str

Obviously, Barcelona, Paris, and Milan are all lovely, wonderful cities, but they are not necessarily m

You're cautiously optimistic in your book, but what worries you most about the future of the

The biggest challenges are in the mega-cities of the developing world, especially Africa. We are a ve
even the core essentially like clean water in many places.

In the US, we have huge problems of fiscal mismanagement that need to be addressed. Moreover, t
of really major physical disasters - either natural or man-made.

**Is there any way around the fact that the most vibrant cities also become the most expensive
is this simply the price of good urban health?**

The laws of supply and demand cannot be repealed. If a city is attractive and productive, demand fo
The best antidote for that is abundant supply, but it is a mistake to subsidize urban housing. The b
affordability comes from private housing construction that is regulated only as much as is absolute
can be expensive and that will always make prices in successful cities more expensive.

**By functioning as engines of economic opportunity and as refuges, cities tend to concentrate
think a case might be made that such inequalities could be interpreted as a symptom of urba
subtly suggesting this in your own work?**

I am suggesting just that. National inequality can be a real problem, but local inequality can be a si
typically make people poor they attract poor people. The inequality of a city reflects the fact that it
and that's something to admire.

How can cities strive to control inequality and avoid ghettos of rich and poor? Should they ev

Education is the best weapon against inequality. Cities should be striving to make sure that the chi
chance of being successful.

Some degree of stratification by income is inevitable, but segregation can be quite costly because s
isolated people lose the urban advantages of connection. There aren't great tools for reducing segr
should make sure that their policies do not exacerbate segregation.

**Geoffrey West at the Santa Fe Institute has been studying cities as 'complex systems' and ider
and quantifiable patterns on this basis. Do you find this type of analysis informative or releva**

Cities are indeed complex systems.

**Even in the modern world, with nationalism ascendant, city states seem to be unusually succe
challenge to dominant conceptions of large-scale political organization? How do you rate the
politics, with a municipal emphasis?**

I don't think that nation-states will be likely to surrender all that much power, and cities can remain politically weak. The path in the US has continued to be towards more, not less, national power and mistake. In many cases - such as Mumbai - local choices would surely be better than the choices im

Other than your own work, who do you consider to be the most important writers on cities to

I deeply admire the Columbia historian Kenneth Jackson.

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